

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

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Right-hand man

After 50 years of service, Billy Pickard still helping Texas A&M

By Shawn C. Millender
THE BATTALION

Texas A&M football head coach Dennis Franchione had no idea what he was about to let loose on his players on the first day of preseason drills in August.

At the end of practice, he unleashed a sinewy, grizzled ball of motivation and hellfire in the form of associate director of athletic facilities Billy Pickard.

"I didn't realize it, but Billy was pretty fired up when he got out there," Franchione said.

The ceremony that honored Pickard's 40 years of service to the program was followed by a fiery speech to the team that had the 105-man group stirred up like an anthill by its end.

"It was good to honor him, anyone who has done as much for the University as he has," Franchione said. "Especially our Athletic Department; he's meant a great deal to me here, and our football program since I've been here."

Franchione introduced Pickard to players who didn't already know the legend, and went on to present him with a 12th Man jersey with Pickard's name on the back. Little did he know of the firestorm that would ensue.

Upon receiving the honor, Pickard immediately set out upon the players.

"You should be determined," said Pickard in a tone reminiscent of Kenneth Brannagh's King Henry V just before the battle of Agincourt, "that nothing will get in our way this fall."

In a voice that gradually increased in volume and conviction, Pickard said, "it's not that big a deal if you go out determined every day to get better, and the first time we put that uniform on in Utah there's nobody..." whereupon he was drowned out by a jubilant, fired-up throng of football players.

Upon graduation from Central Catholic High in San Antonio in 1952, Pickard came to A&M and started serving as a student trainer.

"My intent when I came here was to study to be a high school football coach," Pickard said. "But after working as manager for the freshman team, I realized that if you didn't play college ball that you'd have a hard time being a coach."

Pickard worked under legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant when he took the team to Junction for preseason drills. The entire team, including Pickard, was honored at Kyle Field during Saturday's game against Wyoming.

"That was tremendous," Pickard said. "Some of those guys I haven't seen since 1956."

Lawrence Winkler, a senior football player on

the Junction team, said that even after 50 years, the team remembers Pickard's hard work.

"Billy's been a great guy throughout the years," Winkler said. "Especially supporting the teams like he did. We have a warm spot in our hearts for him."

In Pickard's career, he has seen nine head coaches, hundreds of assistant coaches and

thousand of players come and go.

"I always try and avoid saying this one or that one was my favorite," Pickard said. "No matter what you say, someone will always feel like they got the short end of the stick."

One of the people he worked with the longest is former head coach R.C. Slocum, who came to A&M as an assistant coach in 1972 under then-head coach Emory Bellard. Slocum took over as head coach in 1989, where he served for 14 years before stepping down at the end of 2002. All told, Slocum worked with Pickard for 31 years.

"I don't know anyone who has made a bigger contribution than Billy, he's been here so long," Slocum said. "No one's worked harder than him; he's the first one up here in the morning and always the last one to turn the lights off at night."

Slocum said he used to call him "Nine-man Pickard" because "if I ever lost him, I'd have to find nine guys to replace him."

Slocum recalls just one time when things didn't run so smoothly under Pickard's control.

"I believe it was 1974 and we flew from here to Austin to play Texas. We left here and the weather was comfortable, but in a matter of hours a cold front came through; it was sleeting and I believe the wind chill was around 15 degrees," Slocum said. "Well, Billy hadn't packed any heavy coats or anything for the players or coaches. Billy learned a lesson that day and he always said it'd never happen again. At one point I remember my headset was iced to my cap. All I had was my shirt and windbreaker; I'll never forget it."

One error in 40 years is still a pretty decent track record — even if it wasn't his fault.

"We didn't even own any sideline coats when we went to Austin that year," Pickard said. "But the next day Coach Bellard called me into his office and made sure we ordered some."

There is no end in sight for Pickard, who turns 71 this Halloween. He lives and breathes Aggie football.

"If I wasn't doing this," Pickard said, "I think I'd end up like a lot of the people I see in the obituaries, the ones that work for so long and are dead six months after they retire. I've been very fortunate that (former athletic director Wally) Groff and (Athletic director Bill) Byrne have allowed me to continue to work."

Pickard said he knows exactly when he's going to hang up his roll of tape.

"As long as my health and job performance are good," Pickard said. "Am I hanging on and letting someone else do my job? You never want to be someone who just hangs on. I'd much rather be known as a worker."



Will Lloyd • THE BATTALION

SIDE LINES

ON PG. 9



The volleyball team kicks off Big 12 play against Iowa State in Ames. A look at both teams as they enter the matchup.

COMING THURSDAY

Jon Gilbert examines the recent NCAA football upsets across the country, such as Notre Dame's win over Michigan State and Kansas State's loss to Fresno State.

After a second place finish at the Los Lobos Invitational Tournament, the A&M cross country team looks to fare well in its own tournament this weekend. Look for a preview of the team and the others participating.

BRIEFLY

The Texas A&M women's golf team finished eighth out of 17 teams in the Dick McGuire Invitational Tournament.

A&M soccer junior Laura Probst and freshman Ashlee Pistorius were named the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Week and Newcomer of the Week, respectively.

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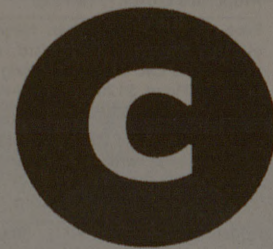
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